

EAST MEETS WEST

Flight of the Eagle

My Eighty-Five Year Odyssey

from the Mekong Delta to the San Francisco Bay

Introduction

By fate or by destiny my grandmother decided that I would be named “qui Dieu”, the Vietnamese word for “Eagle.” Little did she know how appropriate the name would be, for the eagle has come to symbolize my life - through all of my journeys and aspirations to fly above the rest and thrive in spite of the challenges that have come before me - in both the East and the West. My first flight across the Pacific was for education. My last flight across the same ocean was for survival. According to Rudyard Kipling "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." But I have asked myself, when “East meets West, then what?” Since the melding of East and West has truly defined my life, I have chosen to tackle this question by sharing the story of my life - from my childhood in the Mekong Delta to the latter half of my life in San Francisco, where I ended up after coming to America as a refugee following the Vietnam War.

I have never written a book in my life, so why would I do so now at the ripe old age of eighty plus years? Well, when you reach this stage of your existence, there is a popular saying in Vietnam reminding you that “you have come much nearer to the bosom of the earth, and a bit farther away from heavens above,” or as one would say

in the west, I am close to the point of "ashes to ashes, and dust to dust." This is the time of life when all kinds of memories begin to flash back to you with increasing intensity. Very often in the evening, when sitting alone in the quiet of my back garden, all kinds of things surge into my head with a multitude of images from my distant past.

These moments of reminiscing can be extremely emotional and quite chaotic at the same time. For this reason, I have tried to put this kaleidoscope of memories, which in fact consists of my life's story, into some semblance of order. I decided to start writing down these memories in case they might not come back to me again, and the pages just piled up. This prompted me to organize them, not only in terms of time and space, but together with the thoughts, feelings and emotions that I felt along the way - all of which have helped me to become the person that I am today. I have accumulated several hundred pages of memoirs over the past few years of my retirement, so upon the insistence of many of my friends and relatives, I have chosen to share them in the form of this book.

So much for the origin of this book and its title. Beyond simply recording the events of my life, this book is, above all, dedicated to my beloved parents, to my dearest wife Marie who has stood by my side for better and for worse over the past 55 years, and to the members of my extended family as well as numerous friends in Vietnam, the US, and elsewhere in the world who may wish to know more about the story of my life. I spent the first half of my life in tumultuous Asia, specifically Vietnam. I lived through French

colonialism, the Japanese invasion followed by the return of the French expeditionary troops with more war and re-occupation until the Geneva Accords of 1954 which partitioned Vietnam at the 17th parallel thus establishing communist North Vietnam and nationalist South Vietnam. The predominant context of this first half of my life was, of course, the war in Vietnam which came to an end in 1975 but has remained a subject of endless and heated debate to this day even among the experts and pundits. The war in Vietnam must be remembered as one of the greatest collective tragedies of the 20th century, the most devastating armed conflict in the 4,000 years of Vietnam's written history, and the longest foreign war for the American people since the birth of their nation more than two hundred years ago. For me, having been exposed to both the Vietnamese and American ways of life, that dreadful war represents an enormous and violent clash of civilizations, and the terrible consequences of when "East meets West" in the land of my ancestors.

The second half of my life began in April 1975 when I arrived at Camp Pendleton, California. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, at age 44, I lost my country, my home, and my possessions -all things I held dear in my life. Stepping out of Camp Pendleton, I had to overcome the extreme hardship and challenges of a refugee with nothing to my name but \$150 in traveler's checks and a handbag of old clothes. This second half of my life has encompassed 22 years of hard work, followed by 20 years of comfortable retirement in my adopted country.

I must thank my Creator for giving me this second chance in America and not somewhere else, for I

deeply cherish the privilege of living in a country of freedom and opportunity. I had never wished to abandon, or be separated from, my native homeland but remaining in Viet Nam under the totalitarian communist regime was never an option for me and my wife, Marie. It is quite amazing that the fateful and dramatic year of 1975, which has left a deep and indelible scar, sliced my entire life story into two almost equal periods of 40 years. Both parts have been filled with mixed feelings of great joy and happiness, along with profound pain and suffering. During these two long periods of my life, I had three major encounters of "East Meets West." First, during my stay in America for my education from 1952 to 1958, then back in Saigon and through the war which seemed to prove Rudyard Kipling correct, and finally from 1975 on, as a refugee in America with my laborious efforts to secure a meaningful life during which I have shown that East and West can successfully meet in America!

As an American citizen with a hybrid Eastern and Western viewpoint, a Chinese-Vietnamese cultural background, and a combined Vietnamese, French and American education, I want to retrace my journey from my peaceful life in the Mekong Delta of the 1930's to the high tech San Francisco Bay Area of the 21st century. In 1952, long before the American intervention in Viet Nam, I left Saigon to pursue a Fulbright scholarship in the US. Over the next seven years I was fortunate to receive an excellent education from Lafayette College, then the prestigious MIT, and later from Columbia University. In 1958, I returned home to serve in the nationalist South Vietnamese government in Saigon until April 1975 when I was thankfully able to escape

the violent Bolshevik-like takeover of the whole country. A new era, the “rebirth of the eagle,” had started - going through the full circle of riches to rags, and from rags to riches once again.

My initial Trans-Pacific journey from the East to the West in 1952 quickly and drastically changed my life. I left an underdeveloped French colony in old Indochina and flew over the Pacific Ocean to study engineering in America, the most advanced country of the world after WWII. The trip itself was incredible for a Vietnamese youngster in the early 1950s. For me, it was my maiden flight from the shores of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam to the San Francisco Bay in America. It was also the beginning of my personal adventure of "East Meets West."

My Fulbright scholarship allowed me a few days of orientation in the great city of San Francisco to prepare myself for my very first contact with life in America. After that initial clash between East and West, my journey continued smoothly to Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. In all respects, I was "thrown into the ocean to learn how to swim" instead of being gradually immersed into my new environment and the use of the English language. Being uprooted from my traditional Asian family life was, of course, a real nightmare. Homesickness, loneliness, and the language barrier were my worst enemies. Somehow, by surviving all of these challenges, I became a lot stronger and my skin became thicker. These first four years in Pennsylvania transformed my life, making me more independent and more prepared for the tough steps ahead. The next challenge was MIT, along with

my head-grinding efforts to complete my graduate studies as quickly as possible and acquire the professional skills I needed before returning home.

I was determined to study very hard during my years of schooling in America, even if I had to sacrifice fun and leisure in order to succeed academically. The results were simply astonishing. I was consistently at the top of my class, even though many of my classmates were much more intelligent than I was. After graduating from MIT I spent some time working and enjoying myself in New York City. Then finally, in 1958, I made the memorable decision to return to Vietnam, with a ticket on Pan American Airways that enabled me to travel the world for 90 days en route.

Returning home was a real life “Rip van Winkle” experience for me. As soon as my parents and relatives appeared at Saigon Tan Son Nhut airport to welcome me home after our long separation, I realized that my years in the US had been a period of luxury living and a safe haven from the escalating war in Viet Nam. The stark realities about my homeland hit me in full force. And so began a completely new chapter of my life in South Viet Nam. Before getting too settled, I took care of my top priorities - I got married, I bought a house, and began my career.

During my 17 years of hard work in Saigon in the government civilian sector, I did my best to contribute and serve my beloved country which was impoverished by continuous enemy infiltration and armed aggression by communist North Vietnam. In 1966, at age 35, I was the youngest ever Deputy Minister of Economy of South

Vietnam, managing an \$800 million civilian aid program and millions of dollars of Viet Nam's own foreign exchange. I had the chance to form a strong team of "young Turk technocrats." They created the entire necessary infrastructure for the economic development of war-torn Vietnam. In 1967, together with the Vietnamese Minister of Economy & Finance Au Truong Thanh, I had the opportunity to visit President Johnson and his National Security Advisor Mr. Walt Rostow in the White House. Also in attendance was McGeorge Bundy. The purpose of the meeting was to review the economic challenges in our struggling country that had been so impacted by the war.

My dream to see a peaceful and prosperous South Viet Nam never did come true. By April 1975, the situation became a nightmare, and the subsequent fall of Saigon precipitated my second journey to the U.S. - but this time with shock and surprise. The next thing I knew, my wife and I were alive and uninjured in Camp Pendleton in California where my fellow refugees elected me mayor of the camp to take care of thousands of Vietnamese families arriving day after day. From there, a new chapter of my life began, with years of hard work, stress, sweat and fun, followed by my current happy, prosperous and, most of all, healthy retirement in my adopted hometown of San Francisco. My second phase of "East Meets West" was surely now reaching its final stages.

I feel lucky and gratified to be able to record these two long journeys: first from a relatively peaceful Viet Nam, and then the second from a Viet Nam that had been destroyed by war. When I first left Vietnam, it was only

to pursue my education, but when I left my native country for the second time, I had the distressful feeling that this goodbye was for good. I was filled with profound sadness at the loss of freedom and democracy for the Vietnamese people, and also for the painful thought that I would never again see the land of my ancestors, *and I cried...*

Looking back at these memories, spanning the Pacific Ocean and over eight decades, my journey of “East Meets West” has also been an inner one, which has deeply affected my heart and mind. With the amazing human capacity for evolution and adaptation, I remember gradually integrating into the American lifestyle. Little by little I was able to understand the so-called “melting pot,” which has made it possible for hundreds of millions of people from different races, creeds and cultures to have succeeded in creating a society in which to live together in peace. Collectively, they have made extraordinary achievements, by way of tremendous sacrifice, sweat and tears, in all fields of human endeavors. Whether one likes it or not, the melting pot of America has proven to be a unique, but successful, experiment in the history of humankind.

After four continuous decades of living in the United States, I can say that the second half of my life was filled with great challenges. But in this land of the free, I have learned that honesty and hard work can claim its legitimate rewards for people who wish to have a decent and respectable life. For me, America is exceptional, not because it has become the richest and most powerful nation in the world, but because it has propagated its ideals of freedom and democracy to the

four corners of the earth, ever since its birth as a nation in 1776. It continues to do so and is a beacon of light for oppressed people everywhere who are fighting against totalitarianism and dictatorship. Nowadays, many millions of people continue to look at America as the land of asylum, refuge and survival, as I did in 1975.

The reader will note this book contains many photos of U.S. landmark sites, which will be familiar to all Americans, and thus wonder why the need for such photos. My answer is that my book is to be translated into Vietnamese and distributed among Vietnamese readers, many of whom will not be familiar with these American landmarks.

It has been a worthwhile and exciting journey. Let me now tell you my unique and personal story of "East Meets West"- My flight of the Eagle from the shores of the Mekong Delta to the San Francisco Bay.

Khuong Huu Dieu
The Golden State
2015